

Historian reveals link between suicide and political crisis

September 28 2018, by Sean Barton

A link between major political and social crises and mental health has been highlighted as part of research by a historian at the University of Sheffield that is seeking to increase our understanding of suicide.

The study, led by Dr. Julie Gottlieb from the University's Department of History, reveals how there was a string of suicides triggered by fear of war as a result of the Munich Crisis of 1938, when whole populations were in a state of suspense and high anxiety, waiting to hear if they would be in war or peace.

Britain, France, Italy and Germany signed the Munich Agreement on 30 September, 1938, which betrayed Czechoslovakia and gave in to Hitler's demands for the Sudetenland, with Neville Chamberlain returning from Munich with the promise of 'peace for our time'.

The Sheffield study suggests the social impact of the crisis has been overlooked. However, there is clear evidence that almost everyone was absorbed and transfixed as it unfolded, and this was magnified by the media.

The worry over war from the air, being fitted for gas masks, and facing mobilization and evacuation made this a 'People's Crisis' and not just a story of diplomatic intrigue. The crisis also caused and certainly exacerbated [mental health conditions](#). The months from the crisis to the outbreak of war in September 1939 were a 'war of nerves', according to the research.

The University of Sheffield study sheds light on how the depression and anxiety over the possibility of war was a factor in cases of suicide in Britain as well as in the rest of Western Europe.

Examples uncovered by the research include:

- Fear that there might soon be another European war was the reason given at a Hammersmith (London) inquest for the suicide of John James Macdonald, a 42-year-old fitters' engineer, who gassed himself at his home—he had served in the Navy in 'mystery' ships during the Great War.
- A novelist, Mrs Marie Winch, aged 43, was found shot in her home in Maidstone. Her husband, Lieutenant Colonel A.B Winch said: "The September crisis has upset her and she was also obsessed by a fear that her small daughter was going to be taken away from her."
- A railwayman's suicide was "blamed on the European crisis. Harriet Edge, aged 63, was "depressed by the war and what might be coming" in the way of air raids. Edge's husband, a sheet metal worker, told the coroner that "she has been under medical care for nervous debility."
- A Bournemouth doctor killed himself because he had "been depressed since the crisis" and "his mind had been unbalanced owing to the possibility of war."

The University of Sheffield study has uncovered many more examples of suicide cases where the coroner's verdict indicated the crisis, the international situation and/or war or fear as the provocation for these acts. The research has also identified that one of the recurrent suicide methods during the Munich Crisis was suicide by gas poisoning and even by gas mask.

Dr. Julie Gottlieb said: "What has largely been forgotten about the Munich Crisis is that it was also a people's crisis. In Britain, the high pitch of emotions felt as a consequence of these world events led to 20,000-plus letters and telegrams sent to the Prime Minister – the Twitter feed of their day.

"Mass-Observation recorded the way the crisis was experienced by the man and woman on the street. The public hysteria displayed by the many who held Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain up as a 'Man of Peace' and a saviour was counterbalanced by a politics of regret and deep shame – often experienced as physical and mental illness – at the betrayal of the Czechs and collusion with the Nazi regime."

The University of Sheffield study is also set to consider how other major national and international political events – such as the Financial Crisis, the Migrant Crisis and Brexit – affect people's [mental health](#) and wellbeing.

Dr. Gottlieb added: "Brexit has been the subject of immense critique but what hasn't been analysed so far is to what extent this political move is having on people's health and wellbeing. As we move closer to Britain leaving the EU, I can't help but be struck by some parallels between Brexit and the Munich Crisis in terms of the emotional impact that it is appearing to have on people.

"In the days following the EU Referendum, the immediate responses were more emotional than rational. Expansive emotional vocabulary was being used by the media and people up and down the country – as shown when the Metro reported that David Cameron wept after his resignation speech. His aides revealed how it was very emotional, everyone was crying—men and women, even the civil servants. And then David started crying."

The study follows an international symposium on [suicide](#) and crisis, which was held at the University of Sheffield earlier this year. The two-day event brought together those working in medical humanities, history, sociology, and the cross disciplinary field of suicidology, as well as clinicians from around the world, to reflect on the correlations between national and personal crisis.

More information: For more information on Dr Gottlieb's research into suicide and crisis, including the international symposium held at the University of Sheffield, visit: suicidesocietyandcrisis.group.shef.ac.uk/

Provided by University of Sheffield

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